

**Pitt Street Uniting Church, 06 December 2015**  
**A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Jenny Reath**  
**Advent 2C “Worth Refining”**

**Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 2-6; Contemporary Reading** (see page 5)

---

Though this is the first time I have been responsible for the entire witness at Pitt St, I have listened often enough to observe that starting with a personal story is a good way to capture the interest of this congregation. As someone without ANY theological training at all, who is somewhat terrified of attempting to find meaning in the scripture especially for such an erudite congregation, I am starting with not one but 3 stories, which may leave me with just a smidgen of time to reflect on the wisdom provided by this morning’s readings.

Recently I was fortunate to have five days in Bali – and not just 5 days with a heaven on earth mixture of experiences including mountain and coastal scenery, a thigh-sizzling snorkelling expedition, walks through rice paddies and jungles, wonderful food, exotic smells and tastes and interesting reflections on a culture from which we have much to learn (more of that later) ... but 5 days with my two 30 something daughters...on our own...no children, no partners, just us and a shared tropical paradise!

Some of you may recollect my daughters, or others may know me and will therefore not be surprised to hear that my daughters are not people to hold back when they have something important that they want to say. However (and not for the first time I would have to say) Sian surprised me when during our drive across the mountains to the north coast of Bali she took the opportunity afforded by a thoughtful, generous driver who spoke good English and was willing to try to answer the myriad questions that had popped up for us in our previous 3 days as “observers” of Bali life, to ask a question that I would never have dared to ask:

*“How did Bali people react to the Bali bombing?”*

Weyan hesitated for a moment and then spoke slowly and carefully:

*“We are an introspective people. When the bombing happened, we turned into ourselves, we looked for reasons why this had happened in our land and we prayed a lot.”*

It reminded me of the hash tag response to the Lindt Café shooting. At a time when an Islamophobic Prime Minister was poised to lead a frightened community to outrage and ill-considered prejudice and perhaps even violence, the “*I’ll ride with you*” hash tag response to a Muslim woman terrified her dress would expose her to racist reaction, potentially turned a vengeful mob seeking justice, to a compassionate and caring community looking for ways to build bridges and avoid risking our generally (though not always) accepting multicultural community.

A third more everyday story – following a mad dash from the train at Mt Druitt train station a few weeks ago stowing my lap top and my dongle (don’t ask!) into my work bag and grabbing my umbrella, I realised as I mounted the stairs to the gates that I had left my iPhone on the train.

My first stroke of good luck was an unscheduled lift from a co-worker to the Aboriginal Medical service where I work on a Thursday. After an unsuccessful attempt to raise the rail staff at Emu Plains (the terminus for that train), I made a panicked phone call to our admin at the Uni asking them to lock down the phone and arrange a replacement as soon as possible - as without my phone I would be completely unable to function in my work role and more importantly had lost my main connection to my adult children ...who may not have minded too much!

I stopped before calling in the first patient of the day to phone my partner Tim and wail my news to him. In his usually sensible way and assuming a logic to my responses that had completely deserted me that morning, Tim opined "*Well perhaps when you call the phone you may find someone has picked it up.*" I leapt off the call and rang my phone - a few rings and an unfamiliar voice tentatively hello'ed. "*You have my phone - thank you so much*" I bellowed in relief. "*You left it on the train*" my saviour somewhat unnecessarily explained. "*Yes*" I went on, gushing about how grateful I was he had found it. "*How can I meet up to get it from you? I am in Mt Druitt but I can come after work to wherever works for you*" (putting aside all previously made plans to attend our Pitt St refugee action meeting). "*Hang on*" he said, "*I am heading into Auburn TAFE but I can jump on another train that stops at Mt Druitt and give it to you at the station.*" 20 minutes later there he was, a surfer looking teenager, handing me my phone and refusing any financial reward - "*You just have a good day.*" he said, though with some embarrassment he allowed me to hug him gratefully!

### **The good that is in us all!**

Malachi speaks of the messenger of God as like the refiners fire ... and like Fullers Soap .. someone who will purify and refine the descendants of Levi like gold and silver. It strikes me that for all the need of purification - there appears to be implicit in this simile an acknowledgement that there is value (silver and gold) in humankind that is worth refining.

So I start my reflection this morning with the thought - not that we are sullied, impure and of no value but with the possibility that we are gold and silver.... albeit in need of refining and purification!

### **The context**

Both the Old Testament and the Gospel readings speak to us of a time of trial. Malachi (the Hebrew word for "my messenger") is thought by some commentators to have been the self designation of a priest in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC who was disgruntled with the practices of his priestly colleagues and his congregation. He was speaking to a community of Jewish people who had returned from exile to Judah. Jennifer Ryan Ayres suggests in her commentary, that after the hardships of exile and then re-settlement, the prophet was challenged by those in this community who had become sceptical about God's justice because their practices of piety had yielded neither rewards of prosperity nor divine judgement against "evil doers".

The prophet suggests that the judgement they desire may not yield all they hoped for, given their own compromised worship practices, marital infidelity and social injustice (described in later verses). He calls the priesthood of that time to account.

This passage is reminiscent of Second Isaiah 40:3 written a century earlier, proclaiming the commissioning of a messenger to "*prepare in the wilderness a way for Yahweh*" - again prophesying liberation from a time of trial.

Centuries later, in the New Testament these two passages are referenced to identify the messenger as John the Baptist: in Luke 7:27 *'He is the one of whom the scripture says "See I am going to send my messenger before you: he will prepare the way before you."*

The six-fold synchronism in the early verses of the reading from Luke (the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judea, Herod's rule over Galilee and Philip's over Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias's rulership of Abilene and the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas) cannot be understood to provide an exact dating of the appearance of John on the Palestinian scene. However Mariam Kamell notes that it does provide a historical context as well as a Roman and Palestinian ambience to John's appearance. John (and Jesus) existed in a historical time and a specific cultural and political context – there are signals of tensions between Roman rulers and Jewish religious rulers. As we know, the Romans encouraged emperor worship - and the taxes paid to Roman empire were burdening the people.

### **Present day parallels**

For us – we also live in a time of challenges. In spite of the ill-informed rhetoric of shock jocks, the evidence appears clear that the earth's climate is changing and we see daily the evidence of this in extreme weather conditions in other countries and in our own. We expect to see food and water shortages exacerbated by these conditions and Pacific nations and parts of our own coastline inundated as water levels rise.

We are living at a time of the largest movement of the world's people since the Second World War. There are estimated to be 42.5 million people displaced by persecution and conflict around the world. We also live in a time when it is easy to allow fear to pervade our daily living, when a meal at a restaurant, a quick coffee on our way to work, or a Friday night out at a gig could launch us into an unimaginable cataclysm of death and destruction, all watched in horror by the rest of the world.

And we live in a country whose rulers are not willing to acknowledge or to take effective action to address these major world crises, in spite of the rallies and demonstrations we attend to draw attention to these troubled times.

And then when all this becomes too much to hold in our minds, we approach the "silly season" with our usual exhausted gusto - cleaning, hosting, getting out decorations, finishing all the end of the year/ pre-holiday jobs in our paid and unpaid work lives.

Then John interrupts our schedules and demands a different kind of preparation – get ready for the message of Jesus.

Malachi and John are calling to us, as they called to the people of Israel to prepare – not just for the Nativity, but for mighty acts of God. So what are they asking of us in these difficult times?

### **Refining: repenting and seeking forgiveness**

Malachi speaks of extreme heat and strong soap - Fullers Soap was used to press or scour cloth in a mill with alkali – often derived from ashes of certain plants - aiming to whiten the cloth. The language is of all uncleanness washed away, purity that would be demonstrated by "offerings made in righteousness" – reflecting the covenant made between God and the people at Sinai – the "good old times".

Malachi's is a call to turn away from our sins. It is a call extended to the priesthood of that time – at a time when many rival leaders were clamouring for power, Malachi advocated a return to the original principles of the covenant.

What could be more corrupt than a leader distorting the word of God to justify his own political dogma and personal failure to respond to the plight of refugees. The sign in front of Pitt St church in response to Tony Abbott's astonishing re-rendering of the "greatest commandment" sends a message to *our* present rulers too: "Love your neighbour – no exceptions".

And it was exciting to see our church on 4<sup>th</sup> November filled with people young and old, crying, laughing, shouting, twittering together in an action for refugees! And how wonderful to gather last Sunday with others "of spirit" filling Pitt St church and to be led by the Pacific Islander choir as we joined 45,000 others in Sydney and half a million around the world, calling our leaders to action on climate change.

Yet in his commentary Seth Moland-Kopvash warns us that this Malachi text is not a justification for attacking others and pointing out their wrongdoing. Rather WE are the ones who are in need of refining! We might ask ourselves - *What in my life is in need of refining? How much will it hurt? What might I have to give up?* The action on climate change provides a small but pertinent example - global, societal and political change will not be enough – we need to contribute personally to this change in ways that will sometimes be challenging, uncomfortable, even painful.

We joined in the lighting of the candle of peace this morning, recognising that peace is not simply the absence of war but can only exist where there is justice and human dignity for everyone. I am sure if you are like me, there have been times in our lives when we have not ventured beyond our comfort zones, to truly ensure there is justice and human dignity for all. Sometimes it is too uncertain, too confronting, or just too costly for us to take this seriously.

And though John certainly preached a political message - one heard by Herod and leading later to his imprisonment and death – the focus in these verses is on his proclamation of a "*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*". It trips off the tongue but what does it mean?

While this is explained in later verses (and I don't want to pre-empt the more learned reflections of those who will present witnesses in following weeks) it is clear that John's is a different baptism to that offered by Jesus – John's baptism was one of preparation for impending judgement. Yet there is extended the hope of forgiveness – forgiveness that is afforded only by repentance (by being truly sorry and by **changing** what we do). Repentance-meaning to change one's mind, turn around re-orientate ourselves. This is not forgiveness achieved as a result of status or blood lines, or ritual. It is a Baptism of humility and willingness to hear **and respond** to the ministry of Jesus. It is a baptism of preparation for the word of Jesus.

John's words "*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth*" with their images of the rocky landscapes of the Middle East and of ways that are impassable, focus us on action/clearing/ making – this is not about waiting in expectation of certain results or outcomes; it is about working (on ourselves?) to achieve those outcomes.

The specifics of what is this rightly orientated life are revealed later, but for now it is the action we are called to - to straighten the roads, lift up the valleys, make the rough places smooth. This is no easy path John calls us to – it is reminiscent of the bleaching and the Fullers Soap of Malachi. What are the actions for you, for me?

Can we take a moment or two to reflect silently on what actions we may need to take in response to the call of Malachi, of John?

(silence)

### **The hope**

And yet there is hope. John – an ordinary person receiving the word of God in the wilderness - a confronting and confusing place; recalling Isaiah and assuring us in his words that “**ALL** flesh shall see the salvation of God”.

The quotation from Isaiah would have reminded John’s audience of the hope proclaimed by Isaiah to the exiles in Babylon, assurance that their exile would end and that God had not forgotten them – clearly a message of hope.

Referring again to the text from Malachi, Jennifer Ryan Ayres reminds us that when silver is refined, treated with carbon or charcoal preventing the absorption of oxygen – this results in a sheen in which the silversmith sees her own image, as in a mirror. Is it too much to hope that when we have been purified we may reflect a little of the image of God?

Perhaps when we as a society can learn the introspection, the prayerful self-examination that marked the response of people in Bali to the bombing they experienced; perhaps as we as a church act on refugee rights; perhaps when we can start from the wilderness of our own lives and explore the dark, scary corners of our lives – the places where we hope no-one will look because we haven’t managed to clear out the cob webs (or worse the spiders!!); perhaps then there is hope of change, painful costly change perhaps, but change that will prepare us to hear the words of Jesus and respond.

And therein lies the hope – it is in the text messages, the hash tags, the rallies, the people power, and importantly in our own willingness to truly look at who we are and what we need to change that we are able to *act*, like that toadstool in Liz Ramage’s poem, pushing its way through the “rocky” tarmac, a bit bashed in one side, stalk bent halfway, standing all crooked, battered and fragile.... and victorious proclaiming “*ain’t life grand!*”.

### ***‘Gwen’s Monster’***

from *The Poetry and Musings* of Elizabeth Ramage

In the tar-sealed yard  
right outside the doorway  
there came a tiny star-shaped crack –  
and later a very small bump.  
“Something’s trying to escape’ said Gwen,  
and we watched it for a while, and wondered  
but nothing changed  
so we forgot it.

A week later or so later –  
we were having our morning cuppa  
and poring over the crossword -  
“it’s going to get out!” she said  
so we trooped outside.

We’d sort-of-been hoping.  
the cracks had widened, and lifted,  
and you could see the thickness  
of the surface.  
A good half inch of strong black tarry stuff  
“was there someone down there  
just beyond that pebble?”  
“must be tough grass” “a rubber tree”  
“or a very small monster with diamond teeth”

We couldn’t see down that jagged hole, but we laid our bets.  
Couple of days later, there it was  
- soft, delicate toadstool, pale brown  
Cap the size of my thumbnail.  
Stalk thinner than a matchstick  
You had to lie flat on the ground  
to see it clearly

Not properly rounded– a bit bashed in one side,  
where it had drilled its way through the pavement  
stalk bent halfway,  
standing all crooked  
battered and fragile and victorious.  
We marvelled at its power and courage.

By lunchtime we could see the lopsided creature  
had grown beautiful  
taller and wider and hugely confident  
Bobbing a little in the breeze,  
Lifted up its scarred cap so cheekily  
to show the delicate pink gills underneath.  
It seemed to say  
“Ain’t life grand!”  
Our heroic toadstool.

© Pitt Street Uniting Church